

Wonderful Ways to be a Stepparent

Judy Ford and Anna Chase
Berkeley, California: Conari Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Laurie Kruk

If to parent is to struggle with the need to be everything—teacher, counsellor, nurse/doctor, disciplinarian, chauffeur, handyperson—*stepparenting* creates the opposite challenge, one of “stepping” back, watching and waiting as you develop a unique rapport with your stepchild. I have learned this much as a stepmother. The changing state of our society means that stepfamilies are on the rise, no longer anomalies or oddities but it can still feel pretty weird at times. The experience of being the “other” adult—neither Mom nor Dad, friend nor foe (though maybe feeling like both)—brought into their world by remarriage inspires a hunger to fill the void of experience with the words of those who have “been there.”

So I was eager to read this book, and discover *Wonderful Ways to be a Stepparent*. It is one of a series created by Judy Ford, family therapist and the author of *Wonderful Ways to Love a Child* and *Wonderful Ways to be a Family*. Packaged in a hand-size format, this book echoes a “self-help” bestseller, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, in form, philosophy, and depth. The text is divided into three parts: Part I, Relating to Yourself; Part II, Dealing with Your Spouse; and Part III, Interacting with the Kids. Each part comprises 20–24 lessons, no longer than two pages. This structure reminds me of the triangle of interests that a stepfamily represents—the biological parent, the stepparent, and the kids who share their lives—though the symmetry of this book, its evocation of a kind of equilateral triangulation where all sides are even, seems a bit simplistic. The sixty-four points have intriguing titles like “Give up Your Dream of the Perfect Family,” “Keep the Kids Out of the Middle,” “Fine-Tune Your Sense of Humour,” “Talk, Talk, Talk to Your Partner,” “Understand You're the Adult,” “Do It Their Way When You Can,” and “Say Something Positive About the Other Parent.” They are bite-sized summaries of advice, which contain useful observations about the challenges of bringing each side of the triangle together, largely drawn from stepmother Anna Chase's experience. The language is upbeat and accessible, and “real life” anecdotes bring the theory to life. As the writers explain in the Introduction, “It is not our intention to sugarcoat the process of creating a blended family. But we do believe strongly that if you acknowledge the realities of the situation to yourself, your spouse, kids, and stepkids, and accentuate the positive, on the day-to-day level, you can have a wonderful relationship with your stepchildren and live in a house full of love and laughter” (xv). I have a bit of trouble with their claim of not “sugarcoating.” Though many of the lessons are valuable, the very brevity of each seems to

underplay or deny the combined wisdom of therapist and stepmother. For instance, “Do a Two-Minute Reality Check” introduces a contemporary approach to dealing with those “evil stepmother/father” emotions, where sitting “with what is” becomes a way to the “emotional truth of your situation.” For instance, “Oh, I’m hurt at getting no positive reinforcement from my stepchildren despite all I do for them; I’m angry at my wife’s ex for not ponying up his share of the child support” (7). These are real issues. However, there is no discussion of how to share your “reality check” with your family—or even how to use it for your self-knowledge. I would have preferred more space devoted to the process of the “reality check”; the decision to create sixty-four brief lessons, instead of expanding some of the book’s more fundamental or difficult points, gives the text a slightly superficial feel. Perhaps this point-form method of presentation is designed to appeal to that very feeling of helplessness that the stepparent role can generate, by providing a lengthy checklist of things we can do, or do better. Or perhaps this book is meant to be dipped into, at odd moments, for a bit of inspiration and illumination. There is a spiritual subtext to this work, as we are urged to “Search for the Soul Growth” in the stepparenting role, for “those of us who are stepparents have been given the special opportunity to grow our souls through the experience of interacting with and helping to *care for and guide* someone else’s children” (40). It is hard to argue with that—however vaguely “New Age” the advice. I do agree that to find your role as a stepparent, you must recognize and put aside “smallness” on all levels. Despite its compression, this brief book is a first step towards a process of greater understanding of the complex nature of stepparenting in our age’s self-conscious, “self-made” family.

Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love

Janet M. Wright
New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998

Reviewed by Dawn L. Comeau

In *Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love*, Janet Wright, Assistant Professor and Chair of the Social Work Department at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, draws on personal experience as she explores a previously neglected area of research about lesbian families. Wright’s book is based on her research for her dissertation: an ethnography of five lesbian step families.

Wright defines a lesbian step family as “two women who self-define as lesbian, at least one of whom brings a child or children from a former